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WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?
THE ARAB CITIZENS IN THE ISRAELI COMMUNAL SYSTEM

For several years now, it has become commonplace for sociological and political analyses of Israel to highlight communalism. Sociologists have drawn attention to "the perennial nature of Jewish ethnicity[1]", whereas political scientists have stressed "the fragmentation of Israeli society into communities[2]." This feature has been interpreted by many observers as the swan song for a certain form of Zionist ideology that dominated the construction of the State and the first decades of its existence. At the present time, the need for unity of the Jewish people is no longer dependent on homogeneity, or on the denigration of Jews from the Middle East, Russia or Ethiopia. In the past the Sephardis were forced to westernize, and to abandon customs viewed as overly similar to the Arab enemy. Today, some Sephardic Jews, in particular through the *Shas* political party, have used their cultural difference with the Ashkenazi establishment (still largely at the helm) as a tool to penetrate the political arena. Although the Jews who arrived recently from Ethiopia have yet to form a political party, Jews from the former USSR have their own ethnic political representation, in addition to a whole network of various community institutions – associations, newspapers, television channels, etc. – which structure their daily lives.

In short, and even though Sammy Smooha stresses the absence of an Israeli multicultural *ethos*,[3] everything points to the fact that Israel is in the process of joining – with ups and downs - the set of countries who have opted for the community mode as a means of dealing with tensions between ethnic groups at various levels of mobilization. Thus Israeli society is not only simply a plural society in the sense of a social unit in which several groups coexist, which, while integrated within the culture also maintain dividing lines which separate them from the rest of society. Rather it is a pluralistic society where the groups in question have become political actors and are represented in the official political system. A number of writers have pointed out that this transition from the societal to the political has been facilitated in Israel by the

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[1] Title of an article by Sammy Smooha: « La pérennité de l'ethnicité juive », *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, n. 54, deuxième trimestre 1999.
[2] Title of an article by Alain Dieckhoff: « La fragmentation communautaire israélienne », *Le Monde*, 6 juin, 1996, p. 14.
[3] ibid.

electoral system and the tradition of a government by consensus. In fact the electoral system with its single district and proportional representation, party list system and a low qualifying threshold to obtain a seat in parliament implies that the elected officials represent communities or factions to whom they are expected to funnel a maximum amount of public funds[4]. Secondly, a consensual government[5], made up of a broad coalition aimed ideally at representing and accommodating the entire political spectrum and hence representing the society as a whole, encourages a duplication of the society in the political system. In other words, in Israel, it would seem that societal pluralism is mirrored by carbon-copy political pluralism.

After a long period of invisibility[6], Arab citizens as a community today constitute an integral part of this sociopolitical system where social integration is achieved through segmentation. On the individual level, Arab integration in the political community system is reflected in an over-communication[7] of Palestinian identity. Until the mid 80s, the historical tie between Israeli Arab citizens and Palestinians dispersed in other territories – the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Diaspora, etc. – was taboo. Those who mentioned it publicly were considered to be extreme nationalists, both by the Arab population itself, anxious to maintain the *modus vivendi* with the Jewish State, as by the Jewish population and the various Israeli authorities. The fore-fronting of the Palestinian identity was only found in nationalistic circles represented by the Communist Party of Israel, at that time the proponent of a state openly opposed to Israel, which *de facto* served as the sole Arab nationalist party, or purely and simply in outlawed groups. To be part of the overall social system, and in particular the economic sphere, Arab elites adopted the classic strategies of stigmatized minorities. They concealed their identities, adapted to their minority situation by restricting their distinctive features to areas of activity involving no interaction with the majority, and finally played the ethnic card by developing their activities in key areas of their community[8]. Today, in contrast, many Arabs no longer hesitate to publicly proclaim their Palestinian identity. Although in private, and across all generations, they stress their ties to the Palestinian people by recalling the *Nakba*[9] and mention family members in refugee camps in Lebanon or in Syria, the political elite has now penetrated the political space as Palestinians, proclaiming their membership and solidarity with the

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[4] See Emmanuel Saadia, *Systèmes électoraux et territoralité en Israël*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 1997.

[5] Consensual government as compared to a majority government which only includes the majority which won and excludes the minority which lost.

[6] For a detailed analysis of the reasons for this invisibility of the Israeli Arab citizens, see the book by Ian S. Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State. Israel's Control of a National Minority*, University of Texas Press, 1980.

[7] Term used by Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday Anchor, 1959. He uses the terms "overcommunication" and "undercommunication" in everyday contexts of communication of differences between individuals.

[8] These three types of strategies are described by Fredrik Barth, "Les groupes ethniques et leurs frontiers" in Philippe Poutignat et Jocelyne Streiff-Fenart (eds) *Théories de l'ethnicité*, Paris, PUF, 1995, p. 241. The original in English was published in 1969.

[9] The "catastrophe" of 1948.

Palestinian people even in the Knesset. Arab students wave Palestinian flags in Israeli universities and challenge their Jewish colleagues on the *de facto* bi-national nature of the State. Moreover, and the feature is also a recent one, some of their Jewish fellow countrymen have not remained silent as regards this celebration of Palestinian identity: it has become increasingly commonplace to encounter individuals – at least on the Left – who use the term "Palestinian" to define their Arab fellow citizens, thus acknowledging their attempts at self-definition.

The over-communication of Palestinian identity in Arab citizens may seem surprising, since the Israeli context is *a-priori* so hostile to this type of affirmation. It is even more surprising given that in other sociopolitical contexts in the region, there is under-communication of Palestinian identity. In Lebanon for example, young Palestinians try to leave the [refugee] camps by claiming to be Sunnites, trying to link themselves to the Sunnite community which appears to them to be the only vector to participation in Lebanese society. What this comes down to is that the Israeli space, at this point in its history, is not hostile to an affirmation of Palestinian identity. On the contrary, it encourages it. This is because an identity is never a product of its own sources: it is built up from its dialogue with the environment. Many writers have pointed out that in the case that interests us here, the prime structuring interaction was the one with the Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, starting in 1967. The occupation of these territories by *Tzahal*,[10] by opening the Green Line[11], ended the isolation of the Arab citizens of Israel, and enabled them to renew ties with their fellow countrymen. These ties formed the seed bed in which Palestinity gradually developed, up to the current massive dissemination of the idea that the people who are generally known as Israeli Arabs are an integral part of the Palestinian people.

Although the opening of Green Line in 1967 was indeed decisive in particular for the structuring of the Islamic Movement[12], the decisive factor in my opinion was the communal feature of Israeli society, which more than anchoring of Palestinian identity in Arab citizens, lifted the taboo. In other words, the Palestinian identity of the Arab citizens of Israel is less the outcome of a progressive mobilization of the Arab population than the result of Israeli institutional changes which created a place in which they could express themselves. The crucial interaction was thus less with the Palestinians than with certain Israeli actors. The history of the development of the Arab parties shows that it corresponds to the period of national unity governments – between 1984 and 1988. This was a time when the dove faction of the Labor party, which clearly emerged from 1982 onwards, gave its party the identity of the "peace camp." It

[10] Acronym of the Israeli Army.
[11] The Green Line is the border separating Israel and the Palestinian occupied or autonomous areas, i.e. the West Bank and Gaza. It is the 1948 cease fire line, redrawn in 1951 by the so-called Rhodes Armistice agreement, signed by Israel and Jordan, in which Jordan gave Israel a strip of land along the West Bank known as the Triangle (where the majority of the Arabs live today).
[12] The Islamic Movement is one of the main Arab political forces today in Israel, if not the prime political force.

also began to adopt a strategy of co-opting Arab nationalistic organizations to obtain maximum support to defeat the Likud, with whom it was neck and neck[13]. In general, this period can be characterized by the emergence of "fringe political groups,"[14] in particular another key communal actor, *Shas*, which moved from its marginal position to a source of support for one side or the other which was trying to extricate itself from a classic political stalemate. Although the cohesion of Arab citizens into a community is undeniably the equivalent of a protest movement against the Israeli State and its representatives, it also results from a complex process, part of which involved full participation of the Jewish political establishment[15].

However the case of the formation of Arab citizens into a community and a political actor prompts a reassessment of the *doxa* which states that in Israel, the communal political system is a direct reflection of societal pluralism and is based on it. Aside from the case of *Shas*' famous social networks which were created after its rise to power and which are fueled by public funds, the process of patronage of the Arab political parties by part of the leftist Jewish establishment shows that political logic dominates. In Israel, it is first of all the political system which is communal, and this structural feature impacts after the fact on social organization, indeed pushing it towards an extreme politicization of the entire social space. Certain groups reached the qualifying threshold for political representation solely because the government was in crisis, and only then dipped into funding to expand. These groups were initially aggregates of individuals who objectively shared common features but in too nebulous a way to form the basis for political action. Political representation became a means of objectifying the common features, and transforming them into the outward symbols of membership and a political slogan. As Bourdieu[16] stressed, a group is not formed solely on the basis of a common mode of existence, but rather onits knowledge of it. Secondly, the group spokesman plays a key role in this process of group emergence and self-recognition. By re-presenting and symbolizing it, the spokesman enables the group to coalesce and takes part in its formation.

Once the Arab community had achieved this recognition/awareness through political representation however, it was also subjected to centrifugal forces which threatened it with implosion. Aside from purely political struggles which for example pitted Azmi Bishara against his former allies of the Democratic Front for Peace and

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[13] For a more detailed analysis of this hypothesis, see Laurence Louër, "Comment gérer la minorité arabe d'Israël? Les élections de 1999", *Politique étrangère*, 65e année, n. 2, été 2000.

[14] Term used by Ilan Greilsammer, "Les groupes politiques marginaux en Israël. Caractères et fonctions." *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 31 n. 5-6, octobre-décembre 1981.

[15] For a more detailed analysis of this idea, see Laurence Loüer, "La construction des identités collectives et ses multiples acteurs. Les citoyens arabes d'Israël", *Raisons politiques*, n. 2, juin 1999.

[16] See "La représentation politique. Eléments pour une sociologie du champ politique"; *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, févier-mars, 1981. A selection of works by Pierre Bourdieu on politics dealing with the issue of the spokesman can be found in Pierre Bourdieu, *Propos sur le champ politique*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2000.

Equality (Hadash) during the 1999 campaign, the continued *hamula*[17] rivalry at the local level, and the religious tension between Christians and Muslims in Nazareth have been interpreted for the last two years as the symptom of the failure of the Arab community to maintain its newly acquired cohesiveness. The idea of fragmentation is not only a classic one in the scientific analysis of the Arab community in Israel but also a pervasive theme among the players themselves. In other words, aside from the observation of an unprecedented dynamic of unification, which constitutes the emergence of an Arab community, there is a consensus to emphasize its limitations: the Arab community, unable for example to agree on a single list for the national elections, remains an unfinished process.

How can these two opposing thrusts of unification and fragmentation, clearly both at work within the Arab population of Israel, be reconciled? First, the concept of unity should be discarded since in most cases it refers to a greater extent to an ideological stance than a descriptive concept. In this sense, and in this particular case, the concept of community should be divested of the sociological analyses of Ferdinand Tönnies or Sir Henry Maine who, by positing a dualism between community and society helped give the community an image of a unitary, melded group, with no room for internal differences. However, when the community is formed primarily through political representation, the struggles for power for the leadership monopoly are inevitable and should be interpreted as signs of the construction process rather than failure. Secondly, after eliminating melding as building block of the community, the apparent contradiction between unification and fragmentation can be resolved by introducing the notion of a looser bond. Here, the community tie is "a sharing that somehow binds,[18]" "a social tie structure […] in the final analysis fairly loose,"[19] based not on the elimination of factions but rather on shared representations produced and maintained by a network of institutions. The role of community institutions is fundamental, but it consists less of a totalitarian binding of individuals than generating a consensus[20] on group identity and its aims. By beginning with the actors rather than the objective structures of the group, an equivalency can be established, as Giovanni Sartori suggested, between community and consensus.[21] This suggests that a community exists first and foremost through its shared symbols which make unity possible above and beyond divergences. As anthropologists have shown, a symbol is a multifaceted

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[17] Term designating the clan in Palestine; i.e., a kinship group covering several lines and claiming a common ancestor, which also acts like a political group, in particular in the Arab zones of Israel.

[18] Giovanni Sartori, "Understanding Pluralism", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 8 n. 4, October 1977, p. 65.

[19] Shmuel Trigano analyzing the case of the French Jewish community: "le concept de communauté comme catégorie de définition du judaïsme français" in Stéphane Courtois, Marc Lazar et Shmuel Trigano, (eds), *Rigueur et passion, Hommage à Annie Kriegel*, Paris, l'Age d'homme/Cerf, 1994, p. 414.

[20] Which Bourdieu calls a "dominant ideology."

[21] Giovanni Sartori explains that "it strikes me that the definition of consensus as a sharing that somehow binds applies equally to the concept of community," ibid.

representation, which differentiates it from the univocal sign, in that it can be interpreted in many ways depending on the actor who uses it. A symbol can thus be shared by a large number of people who will each assign it a different meaning. To preserve the communal bond, what is crucial is a sharing of the form and not the meaning[22]. This leads to abandoning the notion of the symbol as a form of expression and viewing it as a performative. In other words, a symbol not only expresses a pre-existing reality, but is part of its formation process[23].

To return to the concrete example of the Israeli Arab community, it is obvious that the consensus and the symbols are present and fulfill their role completely. Palestinian identity, which according to a recent survey, 80 % of the Arab population claims as its own, is the omnipresent symbol that unifies all social and political factions. The Arab parties, who are the main community institutions, fulfill their role as consensus-producers completely. On the one hand their slogans are adopted across the board, even by individuals who claim to be a-political. Secondly, despite fierce electoral infighting, and beyond a few specific proposals which are the basis for their political identity and differentiate them from their opponents, they all basically defend the same platform. This is centered on backing the struggle of the Palestinian people for an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital, and hint at support for a binational Jewish-Arab state inside the Green Line[24]. This sharing of symbols results in astonishing cooperation between Arab parties in the Knesset where they in fact form a single bloc.

The Islamic Movement, accused of promoting religious solidarity to the detriment of national unity, is no exception. On the basis of the idea that the emergence of a community of the Arab citizens results from political representation and the electoral strategies of the Labor party, it might be assumed that other Jewish political actors would be interested in splitting the Arab vote. Currently, the Labor Party receives about 95 % of the Arab vote in elections for prime minister. The Likud Party thus has very little maneuvering room to attract Arab backing. Aware of this situation, certain *Likud* strategists thought they could negotiate a number of Muslim votes in the 1999 national elections in exchange for financial support to the Islamic Movement in its rivalry with

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[22] See Anthony Paul Cohen, The Symbolic Construction of Community, London, Ellis Horwood/ Tavistock, 1985. See also Abner Cohen, *Two Dimensional Man. An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Societies*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974 and David Kertzer, *Rituals, Politics and Power*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988. For a case study in the West Bank, see Glenn Bowman, "Nationalizing the Sacred: Shrines and Shifting Identies in the Israeli-Occupied Territories" *Man*, vol. 28, #3, September, 1993.

[23] Furthermore, one of the main principles of Weber's sociology, namely the lag between the symbolic sphere as compared to the socio-economic order, does not imply that the symbols express a preexisting reality but rather that they contribute to their own making by reaching awareness, and by so doing contribute to their anchoring in society.

[24] What in fact is covered by the slogan "the State of all citizens", which in the spirit of Arab citizens is the equivalent of recognition of the Arab minority as a national minority and not a demand for individual, abstract and undifferentiated citizenship, applicable to all citizens of the State. This implies the establishment in Israel of a co- association of the Jewish people and the Arab people.

Hadash in Nazareth. The attempt failed, first because the stigma attached to the *Likud* in the Arab population is too potent for a political organization to authorize itself to be allied to it officially. In the Arab view, the right does not exist in Israel, there is only the racist extreme right. Secondly, the *Likud* leadership preferred to continue delegitimizing the Labor party by arguing that it does not have a Jewish majority and thus does not represent the real Israel. Thus, a Muslim community, until only recently weakly institutionalized as compared to other religious communities like the Druse and Christians, appears to be unable to develop along the same modes as the Arab community; i.e., through the patronage of a large Jewish party. The coalescing of Muslims into a separate community, i.e. into a group based not only on sharing of common objective features but also as an actor and able to carry out a collective mission adheres less to a political dynamic based on representation than on a micro-social one. In contrast to *Shas* which only emerged as a social welfare actor after its rise to power and its use of public funding, the Islamic Movement first of all wove social networks and then turned itself into a political party. Little by little it built up a new religious leadership of the young and educated, which gradually replaced the old generation of imams, who were considered to be incompetent and had little impact because they had no training, given the lack of *charia* institutions in Israel until recently. The Islamic Movement can by no means be subsumed under the banner of an Islamist Political Party. Although the ideology of the Moslem Brotherhood is received well, it is primarily in its neo-fundamentalist[25] version, which having renounced the overthrow of power and an Islamic state, above all emphasizes conduct and piety. Similarly, it reaches out to a mixed audience ranging from young people, educated in Israeli universities, attracted by a political ideology that still garners much support in the region. This ranges from the pious elder happy to have finally found a well trained imam in his neighborhood mosque, to the petty bourgeois concerned with the defense of Muslim "ethnic honor"[26] versus the prosperous and well-organized Christian community.

An understanding of the relationships between these two processes of Arab and Muslim community building traversing the Israeli Arab population is thus a major challenge. At this stage, is it clear that the Islamic Movement, the main vector for Muslim community shaping, integrates fully into the consensus on Palestinian identity, and is less concerned about defending a multi-religious state than a bi-national one. It may be the case that the strengthening of the Arab community has paradoxically encouraged Arab citizens to bring other aspects of their identity into the limelight. Among the followers of the Islamic Movement, the feeling of belonging to the Palestinian people prompts them to introspect on other possible identities -- Muslim, Arab, human -- which they attempt to hierarchize. By becoming consensual, the

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[25] This concept was formulated by Olivier Roy. See, among others, *L'échec de l'islam politique*, Paris, Seuil, 1992: "*Le néofondamentalisme ou l'imaginaire de l'oummah*", *Esprit*, avril 1995; and for a revised formulation, "*Le post-islamisme,"* Revue des Mondes Musulmans et Méditerranéens, n. 85-86, 1er trimestre, 1999.

[26] The term is Max Weber's, of course.

Palestinian identity has led to a dynamic of differentiation: individuals, attempting to differentiate themselves from others, turn to sub-identities. The emergence of a Muslim community could thus be the paradoxical outcome of the anchoring of the Arab community, with consensus producing the Other rather than the Same.

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